Forgotten Civilization Discovered

“Not often has it been given to archaeologists . . . to light upon the remains of a long-forgotten civilisation. It looks, however, at this moment, as if we were on the threshold of such a discovery in the plains of the Indus.

Up to the present our knowledge of Indian antiquities [ancient history] has carried us back hardly further than the third century [B.C.]. Of the long ages before the coming of the Greeks and the rise of the Maurya dynasty; of the birth and growth of civilisation in the great river basins . . . archaeology has given us but the faintest glimmerings.”

—Sir John Marshall, Director General of Archaeology in India, 1924

Focus Question  How have scholars learned about India’s first two civilizations, the Indus and the Aryan?

Early Civilizations of India and Pakistan

Objectives
• Describe the Indian subcontinent’s geography.
• Understand the clues archaeology has provided about the rise and fall of the Indus civilization.
• Analyze the main characteristics of the Aryan civilization and the Vedic Age.
• Explain what ancient Indian epics reveal about Aryan life.

Terms, People, and Places
subcontinent plateau monsoon Harappa
Mohenjo-Daro veneration acculturation Vedas
rajah Indra brahman mystic

Reading Skill: Recognize Sequence  Keep track of the sequence of important events in early India by recording them in the order they occurred.

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In the early 1900s, archaeologists digging in the Indus River valley of Pakistan made some startling discoveries. They unearthed bricks, small clay seals, figurines, and other artifacts dissimilar in style to any they had seen before. The archaeologists soon realized they had uncovered a civilization that had flourished 4,500 years earlier. It had been unknown to the world ever since.

Geography of the Indian Subcontinent

The Indus Valley is located in the region known as South Asia, or the Indian subcontinent. A subcontinent is a large landmass that juts out from a continent. The Indian subcontinent is a huge peninsula extending into the Indian Ocean. Today, it includes three of the world’s ten most populous countries—India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—as well as the island nation of Sri Lanka (sree LAHNG kuh) and the mountain nations of Nepal and Bhutan.

Towerin, snow-covered mountain ranges mark the northern border of the subcontinent, including the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas. These mountains limited contacts with other lands, leaving India’s distinct culture to develop on its own. However, the mountains were not a complete barrier. Steep passes through the Hindu Kush served as gateways to migrating and invading peoples for thousands of years.
Natural Features Define Regions  The Indian subcontinent is divided into three major zones: the fertile Gangetic Plain in the north, the dry Deccan plateau, and the coastal plains on either side of the Deccan.

The Gangetic Plain lies just south of the Himalayas. This fertile region is watered by mighty rivers: the Indus, which gives India its name, the Ganges (GAN jeez), and the Brahmaputra (brah muh POO truh). These rivers and their tributaries carry melting snow from the mountains to the plains, making agriculture possible.

The Deccan is a plateau, or raised area of level land, that juts into the Indian Ocean. Much of it lacks the melting snows that feed the rivers of the north and provide water for irrigation. As a result, parts are arid, agriculturally unproductive, and sparsely populated.

The coastal plains are separated from the Deccan by low-lying mountain ranges, the Eastern and Western Ghats. Rivers and heavy seasonal rains provide water for farmers. Also, from very early times, people in this region used the seas for fishing and as highways for trade.

Monsoons Affect Climate  A defining feature of life in the Indian subcontinent is the monsoons, or seasonal winds that regularly blow from a certain direction for part of the year. In October, the winter monsoons blow from the northeast, bringing hot, dry air that withers crops. In mid-June, the summer monsoons blow from the southwest. They pick up moisture over the Indian Ocean and drench the land with downpours.

The monsoons have shaped Indian life. Each year, people welcome the rains that are desperately needed to water the crops. If the rains are late, famine and starvation may occur. However, if the rains are too heavy, rushing rivers will unleash deadly floods.

**Checkpoint**  How has geography affected where people live in the Indian subcontinent?

**Indus Civilization**

Map Skills  The earliest civilization in the Indian subcontinent developed in the Indus Valley.

1. **Locate**  (a) Himalayas  
   (b) Deccan  
   (c) Indus River  
   (d) Ganges River  
   (e) Harappa

2. **Place**  What natural features did people benefit from by living in the Indus River valley?

3. **Make Comparisons**  How do you think the Narmada River valley would have compared to the Indus River valley as a site for a civilization to develop?
Indus Civilization Rises and Falls

About 2600 B.C., the earliest South Asian civilization emerged in the Indus River valley, in present-day Pakistan. The Indus civilization flourished for about 700 years. However, only since the 1920s have its once-prosperous cities emerged beneath the archaeologists’ picks and shovels.

Archaeologists have investigated numerous Indus sites. Unfortunately, they have not yet turned up any names of kings or queens, tax records, literature, or accounts of famous victories. The written remains of Indus civilization are found only rarely, usually on small clay seals that do not include any long passages. Still, we do know that the Indus Valley civilization covered the largest area of any civilization until the rise of Persia more than 1,000 years later. We know, too, that its cities rivaled those of Sumer.

Well-Planned Cities Reveal Organized Government

Archaeologists’ investigations in recent years have led them to believe that at least five large cities may have been prominent during the course of the civilization’s history. A few hundred smaller sites have also been studied. Since their discovery in the 1920s, the Indus cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro have been considered possible twin capitals of the civilization or cities that ruled the area one after the other. Both were large, some three miles in circumference. Each was dominated by a massive hilltop structure whose exact purpose is unknown. Each city also included a huge warehouse used for storage.

A notable feature of Mohenjo-Daro and a few smaller sites is how carefully planned they were. Mohenjo-Daro was laid out in an organized pattern, with long, wide main streets and large rectangular blocks. Most of its houses were built with baked clay bricks of a standard size. At Harappa and other Indus sites, mud and unbaked bricks were also common building materials. In addition, Indus houses had complex plumbing systems, with baths, drains, and water chutes that led into sewers beneath the streets. Indus merchants used a uniform system of weights and measures. From such evidence, archaeologists have concluded that these Indus cities had a well-organized government.

Making a Living by Farming and Trading

As in other early civilizations, most people living in the Indus civilization were farmers. They grew a wide variety of crops, including wheat, barley, melons, and dates. They also may have been the first people to cultivate cotton and weave its fibers into cloth.

Some people were merchants and traders. Their ships carried cargoes of cotton cloth, grain, copper, pearls, and ivory combs to distant lands. By hugging the coast of the Arabian Sea and sailing up the Persian Gulf, Indus vessels reached the cities of Sumer. Scholars think that this contact with Sumer may have prompted the people of the Indus Valley to develop their own system of writing; however, the Indus writing system is unique, showing no relationship to Sumerian cuneiform.

Religious Beliefs Develop

From clues such as statues and images on small clay seals, archaeologists have speculated about the religious beliefs of Indus Valley people. Many think that, like other ancient peoples, the people of the Indus were polytheistic. A mother goddess, the source of creation, seems to have been widely honored, as perhaps was a leading male god. Indus people also seem to have viewed certain animals...
as sacred, including the buffalo and the bull. Some scholars think these early practices influenced later Indian beliefs, especially the **veneration** of, or special regard for, cattle.

**Indus Civilization Declines** By 1900 B.C., the quality of life in the Indus Valley was declining. Crude pottery replaced the finer works of earlier days. The use of writing halted. Mohenjo-Daro was entirely abandoned. The populations of the other Indus cities and towns also dwindled to small numbers.

Scholars do not know for sure what happened to the Indus civilization, but they have offered several explanations for its decline. They once thought that invaders attacked and overran the cities of the Indus, but this now seems unlikely. Some suggest that damage to the local environment was a factor. Possibly too many trees were cut down to fuel the ovens of brick makers. Tons of river mud found in the streets of Mohenjo-Daro suggest a major flood. Other evidence points to a devastating earthquake. Today scholars think that some of these events may have worked together to bring an end to Indus civilization.

**Checkpoint** What evidence shows that Indus civilization included a well-organized government?
Aryan Civilization Develops During the Vedic Age

During the centuries between 2000 B.C. and 1500 B.C., waves of nomadic peoples migrated slowly with their herds of cattle and horses from Central Asia. They traveled through the mountain passes into northwestern India. 

Aryans Emerge in India These nomads belonged to one of many groups of speakers of Indo-European languages who migrated across Europe and Asia. The nomads intermarried with local peoples to form a group who called themselves Aryans. Through acculturation, or the blending of two or more cultures, the Aryans combined the cultural traditions of the nomads with those of earlier Indian peoples.

The early Aryans in India built no cities and left behind very little archaeological evidence. Most of what we know about them comes from the Vedas, a collection of hymns, chants, ritual instructions, and other religious teachings. Aryan priests memorized and recited the Vedas for a thousand years before they ever wrote down these sacred teachings. This period, from 1500 B.C. to 500 B.C., is often called the Vedic Age.

In the Vedas, the Aryans appear as warriors who fought in chariots with bows and arrows. They loved food, drink, music, chariot races, and dice games. These nomadic herders valued cattle, which provided them with food and clothing. Later, when they became settled farmers, families continued to measure their wealth in cows and bulls.

From Nomadic Life to Farming Gradually, the Aryans gave up their nomadic ways and settled into villages to cultivate crops and breed cattle. From local farmers, the Aryans learned to raise crops. They also took up other skilled crafts.

In time, the Aryans spread eastward to colonize the heavily forested Ganges basin. By about 800 B.C., they learned to make tools out of iron. Equipped with iron axes and weapons, restless pioneers carved farms and villages out of the rain forests of the northeast.

Aryan tribes were led by chiefs who were called rajahs. A rajah, who was often the most skilled war leader, had been elected to his position by an assembly of warriors. As he ruled, he considered the advice of a council of elders made up of the heads of families. Rajahs often fought with one another to control trade and territory across the Gangetic Plain. Some rajahs became powerful hereditary rulers, extending their influence over many villages.

Aryans Structure Society From the Vedas, we learn that the Aryans divided their society into ranked groups based on occupation. The highest group was made up of the Brahmins, or priests. Next came the Kshatriyas (kuh SHAT ree yuhz), or warriors. The third group, the Vaisyas (VYS yuz), included herders, farmers, artisans, and merchants. The Aryans separated people who had little or no Aryan heritage into a fourth group, the Sudras (SOO druz). This group included farmworkers, servants, and other laborers. The lowest social group, the dalits (DAH lits), was considered outside of the caste system. These people did work that others wouldn’t, such as making leather from animal skins.

The gods’ creation of the universe is described in the Rig Veda. It says they divided the body of Purusha, the first man, into four parts to create the four social groups of ancient India. Which parts of the body became the warriors?

Primary Source

“When they divided Purusha, in how many different portions did they arrange him? What became of his mouth, what of his two arms? What were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth became the Brahmin; his two arms were made into the Rajanya [Kshatriya]; his two thighs the Vaisya; from his two feet the Sudra was born.”

—Rig Veda, “Hymn of Man”
Aryan Religious Beliefs Develop  The Aryans were polytheistic. They worshiped gods and goddesses who embodied natural forces such as sky, sun, storm, and fire. The chief Aryan deity was fierce Indra, the god of war. Indra's weapon was the thunderbolt, which he used not only to destroy demons but also to announce the arrival of rain, so vital to Indian life. Other major gods included Varuna, the god of order and creation, and Agni, the god of fire and the messenger who communicated human wishes to the gods. The Aryans also honored animal deities, such as monkey and snake gods.

Brahmins offered sacrifices of food and drink to the gods. Through the correct rituals and prayers, the Aryans believed, they could call on the gods for health, wealth, and victory in war.

As the lives of the Aryans changed, so, too, did their beliefs. Some religious thinkers were moving toward the notion of brahman, a single spiritual power that existed beyond the many gods of the Vedas and that resided in all things. There was also a move toward mysticism. Mystics are people who seek direct communion with divine forces. Aryan mystics practiced meditation and yoga, spiritual and bodily disciplines designed to enhance the attempt to achieve direct contact with the divine. The religions that emerged in India after the Vedic Age were influenced by both mysticism and the notion of brahman.

**Checkpoint**  How were Aryan society and government structured?

**Vocabulary Builder**

embodied—(em BAH deed) vt. gave a visible form to something abstract

**Communing With the Divine**

Below, a young woman in China practices yoga, which is popular around the world today. At left, a 1,500-year-old Indian sculpture shows a Hindu man seated in a traditional meditation pose. Meditation, too, is still practiced by many people. **Why do you think these disciplines have appealed to people for so long?**
Epic Literature Tells About Aryan Life

By 500 B.C., Indian civilization consisted of many rival kingdoms. Archaeologists have learned that cities were growing rapidly at this time as people left the countryside to practice skilled crafts. By this time, too, the written language, Sanskrit, that priests had used to write sacred texts began to flourish in literary usage.

The Aryans maintained a strong oral tradition as well. They continued to memorize and recite ancient hymns, as well as two long epic poems, the *Mahabharata* (muh hah BAH rah tuh) and the *Ramayana* (rah MAH yuh nuh). Like the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Indian epics mix history, mythology, adventure, and religion.

*Mahabharata Tells of Warfare and Religion*  The *Mahabharata* is India’s greatest epic. Through its nearly 100,000 verses, we hear echoes of the battles that rival Aryan tribes fought to gain control of the Ganges region. Five royal brothers, the Pandavas, lose their kingdom to their cousins. After a great battle that lasts 18 days, the Pandavas regain their kingdom and restore peace to India. One episode, a lengthy poem known as the *Bhagavad-Gita* (BUG uh vud GEE tuh), reflects important Indian religious beliefs about the immortality of the soul and the value of performing one’s duty. In its verses, the god Krishna instructs Prince Arjuna on the importance of duty over personal desires and ambitions.

*Ramayana Teaches Values of Behavior*  The *Ramayana* is much shorter but equally memorable. It recounts the fantastic deeds of the daring hero Rama and his beautiful bride Sita. Early on, Sita is kidnapped by the demon-king Ravana. The rest of the story tells how Rama finally rescues Sita with the aid of the monkey general Hanuman.

Like the Aryan religion, these epics evolved over thousands of years. Priest-poets added new morals to the tales to teach different lessons. For example, they pointed to Rama as a model of virtue or as an ideal king. Likewise, Sita came to be honored as an ideal woman who remained loyal and obedient to her husband through many hardships.

**Checkpoint**  What types of values are revealed in Indian epics?